

A Ninth Congressional District Conference: Growing a New Agricultural Economy (November 21, 2005)

Abingdon, Virginia

Let me welcome you to our Ninth Congressional District Conference: Growing a New Agriculture Economy. Our topic this morning is one of interest not only to families engaged in farming on a full time or a part time basis in Southwest Virginia, but also to the communities in which they live and work.

Our region has a rich agricultural heritage that reaches back through many generations of farming families. It is a culture and a history worth preserving and a way of life that we should work to retain and even strengthen. There are currently 12,390 active farms in the counties that comprise Southwest Virginia.. Our farm operators market \$287 million in products annually, and they spend more than \$254 million to do so. And for every one dollar that farming puts into the economy directly in the purchase of equipment, supplies and labor, five to ten times that amount flows through nearby communities in the purchase of goods and services at grocery stores, gas stations, beauty shops and other local business establishments. In fact, the Virginia Cooperative Extension estimates that the total economic activity generated by farming in Southwest Virginia exceeds \$1.7 billion every year.

Clearly the overall effect of farm income on local economies is significant - so significant that retaining the agricultural heritage of our region and assuring that farming continues to play a healthy role in our economy is more than a cultural and historical issue. It is an economic necessity.

Farming families today face new challenges. To be successful these days requires those engaged in agriculture to be mathematicians, environmental scientists and chemists. Farmers must possess a working knowledge of biology, botany and zoology. And increasingly, they must exhibit marketing skills.

But there are also new agricultural opportunities to be pursued. The purpose of today's conference is to explore those opportunities in order to assure that families who wish to continue making a living from their farms can continue to do so to their own benefit and to the benefit of their communities.

Our conference begins this morning with a presentation by my friend Steve Smith, President and CEO of Food City. For many years, Food City has been an asset to Southwest Virginia and has honored a strong commitment of service to the region. Led by Steve Smith, Food City supports local farmers and produce vendors by selling locally grown produce in its stores. Steve has also been instrumental in the creation of a market for the local production of hair sheep. This morning, Steve will discuss the growing market for locally grown fruits and vegetables.

Following Steve Smith's presentation, several speakers will continue to address the great demand for locally grown products. Anthony Flaccavento will discuss the large market for organic produce. Anthony is the Executive Director of Appalachian Sustainable Development. He will also be discussing the emerging market for grass-fed beef.

Martha Mewbourne, President of the Scott County Hair Sheep Association, will discuss developments in the local hair sheep industry, and Dr. George Flick of Virginia Tech will give an update on the aquaculture market.

I am pleased to have joining us today several representatives of the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services who will address the market for ornamentals, new opportunities in the Christmas tree and pumpkin industries, and the viticulture industry in Virginia.

The final hour of our conference is dedicated to the many opportunities in Southwest Virginia for agri-tourism. Representatives from two of the area's wineries, Chateau Morrisette in Patrick County and Davis Valley Winery and Vineyard in Smyth County, will be making presentations about the great opportunity for tourism in Virginia's wine industry.

Finally, we will have presentations from two local farms that offer visitors family entertainment: Matthews Living History Farm in Grayson County and Sinkland Farms in Montgomery County.

I would like take this opportunity to thank these exceptional speakers for their participation in this morning's conference. I hope you will find their presentations enjoyable and beneficial.

I would also like to thank Rachel Fowlkes and the staff of the Southwest Virginia Higher Education Center for their great assistance in the planning of this conference.

Finally, I would like to recognize my Chief of Staff, Becky Coleman, my District Director, Laura Lee and my Project Manager, Courtney Lamie, for their work in organizing this conference and the exceptional line up of speakers who will be participating today.